

The Pope . . . and Truth

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It is not every day that I agree with the Pope.

After all, to say the least, we have several non-trivial theological differences. There is also the matter of the history of the Church, and its relationship with our people, and frankly, many more matters than I can list in this essay.

Today, however, I must say that I stand firmly with the Pope in a position that he took last week.

While many of my co-coreligionists may not be aware of it, on October 27, 2011 Pope Benedict XVI invited some 300 religious leaders, and tellingly, some non-religious leaders, to the city of St. Francis to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of one of the signature achievements of his predecessor. John Paul II convened a "World Day of Prayer for Peace" on Oct. 27, 1986; an event that was part of that pontiff's historic opening to other faiths, the legacy of which is now known as the "Spirit of Assisi." During that event one could witness, along with a traditional Catholic prayer, Zoroastrians tending a sacred fire, Buddhists chanting to the accompaniment of gongs and drums, and a Native American medicine man in traditional headdress calling down the blessings of the "Great Spirit" while smoking a peace pipe. The event was immortalized by a picture showing all the various religious leaders standing together in their distinctive dress under the great banner of peace. This convocation was one of the great moments in cementing John Paul's place as a great promoter of peace, coming as it did shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Interestingly, however, not all of the Pope's Catholic brethren were positively infused by the "Spirit of Assisi." Several prominent leaders of the Catholic Church split with Rome because of it. One of the strongest critics was then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, who told an interviewer that Assisi "cannot be the model" for such encounters. The cardinal later wrote that "multi-religious prayer" of the kind offered there "almost inevitably leads to false interpretations, to indifference as to the content of what is believed or not believed, and thus to the dissolution of real faith."

In other words, to believe that all faiths have an equal claim on the truth – that in fact truth is a relative concept and there is no one absolute ultimate truth – is to strip one's faith of any real content by giving equal validity and credence to mutually exclusive points of view. One cannot believe that the Christian Savior was the son of God, and at the same time offer full validity to those who deny this claim; One cannot accept Mohammed as a true prophet bringing a new truth to the world, while at the same time rejecting his teachings as inconsistent with G-d's law, and so on and so forth, if there is to be any real content to one's faith. As Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, he wished to "make clear that there is no such thing . . . as a common concept of God or belief in God, that difference not merely exists in the realm of changing images and concepts" but in the substance of what different religions claim. A seemingly obvious position, but one that is rejected by much of the intelligentsia of the Western world, who believe in moral relativism and the absence of an objective truth about G-d and the universe.

Now that Cardinal Ratzinger is known to the world as Pope Benedict XVI, he found himself in a bit of a dilemma in squaring his beliefs with the honor that he owed his beloved predecessor, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for his works of Peace, including peace between and amongst the various faiths.

The pope's solution was ingenious. Rather than advertising this day as being about a "Prayer for Peace", the day was advertised as a "Day of Reflection, Dialogue and Prayer for Peace and Justice

in the World". Invited to participate were not only religious leaders but agnostics who are seekers of Truth, and in fact the pontiff devoted his concluding remarks to welcoming them and joining with them in Unity. The various invocations were not "prayers" so much as calls for a united stand for peace and against war and terrorism, acknowledging that in our world today there are those who, most unfortunately, kill in the name of religion as well as those who target people of faith.

To those listening carefully, this was masterful diplomacy in which: the cause of Peace was truly honored, respect was shown to those who practice a great variety of faiths, while at the same time avoiding any joint prayer or acknowledgment of the truth of those other beliefs.

As we now begin the study of our Patriarch Avraham with the onset of Parshiot Lech Lecha through Chayei Sarah, we see lehavdil, a similar tension.

On the one hand, Avraham Avinu, through the force of his kindness, courage, and integrity was universally acknowledged as a Prince of G-d among men, a beacon of light admired by all (see Bereishis 14:18-21, and more so, 23:6). He more than held his own with the Kings of Sodom, the Emperor Nimrod, Abimelech, and the Pharaoh, all of whom had different beliefs than did he, and garnered their respect for the Almighty. He sought good for all mankind, praying even that G-d spare the presumably atheistic and depraved society of Sodom & Gomorrah.

Yet on the other hand, Avraham is also known as Avraham HaIvri (Abraham the Hebrew), which according to our Tradition means: Avraham was the one who stood to one side against the whole world. Living in the midst of their pagan and polytheistic, and even atheistic cults (the Tower of Babel was a formative experience of his youth), Avraham stood tall for his monotheistic belief system and was even thrown into a fiery furnace rather than recognizing the idolatrous cult of Nimrod as the relative truth.

Avraham's life is a testament to the importance of being able to live and proudly proclaim the unique truth of one's faith while garnering the respect and admiration of all the people of his time, very much including the religious leaders.

So kudos to the Pope. While I strongly disagree with his religious views, I salute him for his honesty in not pretending that he agrees with mine, and allowing us to hold each other in mutual respect.